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Folk etymology, neighbourhood proximity and the gradual nature of compositionality

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Folk etymology, neighbourhood proximity and the gradual nature of compositionality

In this poster we determine whether the principle of compositionality applies to natural language by carefully analysing data which are traditionally referred to as folk etymologies (De Vooy's 1908, Maiden 2008). Folk etymology is the process by which the form of an exotic loan word is modified in form so that its form and meaning are related to other words of the language importing the loan word (the recipient language). An example is the loan *asparagus*, which entered the English language as *sparrow grass*. The process of modification is sensitive to formal and semantic analogies between the loan word and the lexicon of the recipient language (on the relevance of semantic analogy, see Hoekstra & Van der Kuip 2017). The process of modification is far from arbitrary. It seems to involve some measure of formal and semantic similarity, which we formalise with the aid of the concept of Neighbourhood Proximity (Wallis 2007). Neighbourhood proximity is formally defined as one phoneme per metrical unit. A metrical unit of a loan word can potentially be replaced by every word in the neighbourhood of that unit. A successful replacement characteristically displays a relatively high frequency and it displays semantic similarity to the loan word. The process of analogy-driven modification strongly suggests that compositionality does not always apply to natural language, and in so far as it seems to apply in a gradual way, it reduces to analogy.

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